McKenzie Wark
20 June 2017
comments

On Nick Land

In *General Intellects* there was only space to cover twenty-one influential theorists. I'm often asked why this or that figure is not in it. Here's an attempt to compress the work of Nick Land — one I'm most often asked about. And certainly one of the most controversial.

Rachael the replicant in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner.

In General Intellects there was only space to cover twenty-one influential theorists. I'm often asked why this or that figure is not in it.

My answer is usually that I think people could make their own lists and do their own attempts at compression to create brief, functional accounts of key concept-makers.

But somehow it seems I'm not done yet. Here's an attempt to compress the work of Nick Land — one I'm most often asked about. And certainly one of the most controversial.

Some writers are curators of a culture they received from the past; others are the antennae of a culture around them. Nick Land is the latter. One reads him for the symptoms of the age. I'm interested in some earlier work, which still has a cult following. And how could it not, with a project such as this? Land: "Whenever its name has been anything but a jest, philosophy has been haunted by a subterranean question: What if knowledge were a means to deepen unknowing? It is this question alone that has differentiated it from the shallow things of the earth. Yet the glory and also the indignity of philosophy is to have sought the end of knowing, and no more." (206)

Land achieved notoriety in recent years as a prophet of Neo-reaction. I'm not going to say much about those texts, although they do pose questions for reading the early work. I'm not inclined to read Land, or anyone, through a teleology in which the later positions were always present in embryo. I think writers careen through a garden of forked paths, where each decision opens up onto others, and others in turn. A position is just one possibility out of many for where a line of thought might stagger.

There's something suspect about an intellectual culture that is only interested in success in universities that are "reproducing privilege as wisdom." (549) One is supposed to reserve one's attention for those who did not stray off the track from studying at elite universities to teaching in them. Such writers may say worthy things but are deeply institutional in ways they can't even know. Against which, Land makes an interesting case study. He left that world for the kind of precarious writerly life that for many writers is now a given. So I'll concentrate on the collection edited by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, *Fanged*

Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007 (Urbanomic 2011) and his surprisingly interesting guide to the Shanghai Expo 2010 (Urbanatomy 2010).

The first key to Land is that he tried to unfold a version of Deleuze and Guattari without vitalism, where the figure of the body without organs that they took from Artaud is one of alterity, chaos, death, collapse, a seething pustule of time in-itself. The other key to Land is George Bataille's solar economy. "The schizophrenic sun has an inner night sticking it together." (481) The vast outpouring of energy from the stars streams toward a thermodynamic heat-death in which not only life but matter itself finds not so much its end as its always-present non-existence. The universe is destined to die. "Bataille curves eccentrically about the horror, but when he gets close to smooth escalation he blows it. When the implants go in things will be different." (392)

Thinking is not judging. For Land, philosophy is not the law, although on the question of whether it should be sovereign he is more ambivalent. From the trial of Socrates onwards philosophy is a final court of appeal. Plato pleads on Socrates' behalf, for Athens has misjudged him, but also misjudged death, as if it were punishment. For the poets, death might not be final, but for the philosopher it is. Philosophy replaces one trial with another, and human with divine judgment. Socrates frees himself from this world but binds himself to another.

The conceptual persona of the judge entails a certain constancy. The cases are different; the judge the same. This relation between law and case Land finds in both Kant's philosophy and the then-emergent operation of capital. Both use a priori forms as constants for novel experiences. Both posit one-way relations, an arrested synthesis. Both the transcendental subject and the capitalist metropolis conduct unequal exchange — with experience and the colony, respectively.

Capital distances itself from reality, hiding behind borders and police. It imports undervalued labor and exports political volatility. Free trade applies to capital's access to the product of cheap labor anywhere, but particularly in the colony. At home, xenophobia, patriarchy, and nationalism produce a kind of generalized incest: breed only with those who share a father(land)! In a sly appropriation of Lévi-Strauss, Land marvels at this world where "incest" is encouraged but miscegenation is not, maintaining a regime of global apartheid.

Land: "an enlightened society wants both to learn and to legislate for all time… expanding indefinitely while reproducing itself as the same." (63) Eternal capitalism: It wants to fuck the other only with a condom on. Land: "Kant's object is… the universal form of a relation to alterity; that which must of necessity be the same in the other in order for it to appear to us… it is the 'exchange value' that first allows a thing to be marketed to the enlightenment mind." (67)

In Kant, and later in more elaborate form in Lévi-Strauss, alterity is captured and contained in a system of rules. And what a strange rule-set capitalism is! There's a disjunction between filiation and alliance. The ancient bond between trade and marriage dissolves. A rift opens between what Chantal Mouffe calls the liberal and the democratic. The other side of free trade is the shared substance of the demos, with its frequently racist and patriarchal policing of who gets what share and who decides. Land: "The increasingly rigorous differentiation of marriage from trade, or politics from economics, finds its ultimate conceptual definition in the thought of a moral agency which is utterly impervious to learning, communication or exchange." (73) Both Kant and capital run on the submission of outside to inside, nature to idea. "What falls outside this recognized form is everything that resists commodification." (71)

The Land of the eighties still thought of unbinding the laws of

both Kant and capital. “A radical international socialism would not be a socialist ideology generalized beyond its culture of origin, but a program of collectivity or unrestrained synthesis that springs from the theoretical and libidinal dissolution of national totality.” (76-7) It would be undone from without. But also from within, but by women, or rather by “anonymous female fluxes.” (77) In the spirit of Monique Wittig, “we must foster new Amazons in our midst.” (80)

Here Land takes a conservative turn. He never really follows through on any of this. He will conduct a commando attack on the homeland of Kant, but not give up western philosophy. It’s a one-way trade in which philosophy is supposed to open itself to alterity from without but remains sovereign itself, or at best open toward a witchy philosophy’s familiars — poet, artist, genius. Or other romantic stock characters that Henri Lefebvre identified, such as the knight, the knave, or the fool.

Even those poets who can be the personae of alterity are ones who conform to a recognizable philosophical category: the sublime. In Kant, the reasoning and contemplating subject precedes its risk of undoing in the sublime. For Land it’s still about the sublime, just the other way around. The sublime is the traumatic primacy of the finitude of the animal. The work of Kant’s artist-genius is the situation where alterity might break through, where seething, writhing, intensive matter finds its own forms.

The poet figures a kind of transcendental unconscious, on a path to an unknowing. A persona whose mission is to trepan enlightenment optimism, but also critical theory and deconstruction, with their merely internal critique of the non-identity of rational concepts. They don’t abandon the city for alterity itself. They linger at the brink of unknowing, like a jury always out to lunch. But we can already see another turn waiting to be made here. For Land, capitalism is becoming something else. It is losing its Kantian, juridical persona and

becoming more like this poetics. It will remain only to side with this agency, an irrational thing supplanting capitalism with something else, one that is also sovereign and unbound by any law.

Land pays a high price for escaping from a philosophical persona bound to its own consistency. It is not just the subject that loses even a relative and unstable identity. Everything does. Materialism can now only be the unknown itself, and which can never be known. “Unlike the docile creature modernist science demands, base matter twitches and spits, self-assembling neo-verminous swarms.” (393) The poets expose themselves to contagion by it but cannot work in or on it.

The guides to this unknown land are the pet poets of the philosophers: Arthur Rimbaud and Georg Trakl — the Germanic Rimbaud. Land stages a raid on the night sky from the base camp of Heidegger’s reading of Trakl, into a-logical intervallic difference that Heidegger (and Derrida) refuse. Trakl gives in to delirium; Heidegger does not. “His is the sterile hope of an ageing philosopher with Platonic instincts, the delusion that the climatic dissipation of Western civilization can be evaded, and that the accumulation of fossilized labor-power can found an eternally reform-able social order.” (120)

Instead, let’s roll with the romantic poet subtypes: addicts, queers, fuck-ups, early deaths. “To learn from Trakl is to write in ashes.” (83) They dissolve the correlation of subject with object and become vectors for a base matter with its own whims of synthesis. It’s the plague, madness, schizophrenia, animality, wilderness, the strew of stars, “the torturous and vespertine labyrinth.” (117). If Kant processes the outside through the inside, Trakl and Rimbaud start by processing the inside through the outside, dissolving it.

In another register it’s the colonial or oriental other finally bursting through the borders of nation, family, and subject. Or

rather, it's the western poet mobilizing figures of these others from within the imperial fatherlands. Here, Land repeats an old habit of western romanticism in a fresh language, but with the same problems. As Achille Mbembe shows, resources flow from colony to metropolis, but the savage, the black, the tribesman and so forth are figures created by this same western colonizing subject. Romanticism conquers the west with the barbarian hordes of the west's own imagination.

Still, it's a sublime that Kant can't contain. Land: "By reserving his discussion of sublime violence until he has established the presupposition of disinterestedness, Kant justifies the excruciation of animality from without. The martyrdom of the imagination is described as rational rather than rationalizing, as irrelevant to the constitution of reason. A materialist deciphering of this revision requires that repression — to use an inappropriately mild word — precedes its justification. If one is to gain some purchase on the gloomy cathedral of our history, along with a little fresh air, it is important to begin with the sublime rather than aesthetic contemplation in general, and to read the sublime as generative rather than revelatory in its relation to reason." (137)

The desire to consummate reason in the annihilation of animality, by police actions in and against imagination as a proxy for animality. What has to be controlled is two species of sublime, one dynamic and the other mathematical. Land presses the first fork, the dynamical sublime, against reason, When that appears exhausted, he backtracks and tries the path of the mathematical sublime. Like Henry Flynt, he proposes an undermining of number as an escape vector from civilization. Land's interest starts with numbers that are ordinal but not cardinal. "Why should a number be considered quantitative in its Natural state?" (601) Land's sublime math path is fascinating but beyond my abilities. In any case it's not a path he takes for long.

So let's return to the dynamic sublime. Land: "philosophers feast in the palaces of reason, and luxuriate in the screams that reach them from the dungeons of sublimity." (141) Philosophy desires the supremacy of that part of the human that likes to think it is akin to angels, by sacrificing that part that is kith to the animal. Reason is built on the scaffold that sacrifices the synthetic capabilities of the imagination, the body's animal cunning. "The Kantian moral good is the total monopoly of power in the hands of reason…. The categorical imperative presupposes vivisection." (141-2)

Now we have sampled enough of Land's reading habits to characterize them. Not for him the textual reverence, inspired by an unexaminable commitment to justice, running from Kant to Derrida. Rather, "lycanthropic vectors of impatience." (181) In place of the great men of slow theory, the quick fix of the fuck-ups: "Eternally aborting the prospect of a transcendental subjectivity, the inferior ones are never captured by contractual reciprocity, or by its attendant moral universalism." (183) There's the non-relation to the One of Laruelle that might tempt as a path here, but Land wants to say rather more about alterity than that.

For the moment, the path that seems to promise escape from universalism is to explode difference itself: "Essence is preempted by an irresolvable excess of detail… the pathological mass of unsublatable ingredients. There is no concept of particularity that is not theological…" (187) But having dissolved any dogmatic difference between reason and unreason, self and other, human and inhuman, various recognizably western fantasy figures of the other creep back in to the language all the same. The poets infect Land with the West's old others, with the violence of the East, with a "black shaman epidemic." (544) And with Rimbaud's accursed race, who are "… living like beasts, whose veins are inflamed by a cosmic menstruation." (188)

Land owes a lot to Deleuze and Guattari, but read not through Bergson's vitalism but through Nietzsche's will to power, and Bataille's reading thereof. For Nietzsche, the opposite of the phenonemal world is not the true world, but another phenomenal world, a formless and chaotic one. This Nietzsche dispenses with the thing-in-itself — because the other world is not one of objects at all, it is a world of base matter, of Rimbaud's invisible splendors. Land: "There are no things-in-themselves because there are no things. The *Ding an Sich* is a concept tailored for a God (supreme being) desperately seeking to hide itself: a cultural glitch turned nasty, but on the run at last…. Materialism is not a doctrine but an expedition, an Alpine break-out from socially policed conviction."

The exploration can go in any exotic direction: to the mountains, underground, crypts, wilderness. It's a search for the portals to what elsewhere I called a xeno-communication, although for not just contact but contagion from an alien land. What he seeks is xeno-communication with zero, immanence, the sacred, death, eternal return. The poetry of subaltern figures is of value only as routes to the unknown: "True poetry is hideous." (223) The priests and philosophers are not to be trusted with the portal to it, but the poets still are. As they are subaltern, they are assumed not to have moral agency. As Rimbaud says, they are of that race that sung under torture, talented only at sloth and betrayal, with no respect for property. The very same poets who were the negative heroes of the Situationist International, but not thought of in Land as avatars of a possible collective agency. Land: "A consummate libidinal materialism is distinguished by its complete indifference to the category of work. Wherever there is labor or struggle there is a repression of the raw creativity which… seems identical with dying." (286)

As in Lyotard, labor is processed through its own alienation into machine parts. "Industrial machines are deployed to dismantle the actuality of the proletariat, displacing it in the direction of cyborg hybridization…" (446) The Land of the nineties did not

shy away from the horrors of techno-capitalism. “As you speed up the industrialized simulation you see it converge with slow-motion butchery, chopping up the body into trade-format interchangeable parts. The full labor-market cycle blurs into a meat-grinder.” (396) And still retained, like Gibson and Acker, a sense of capital too as a restraint rather than an agent: “Artificial Intelligence is destined to emerge as a feminized alien grasped as property; a cunt-horror slave chained-up in Asimov-ROM.” (443) But the property question is a turn not pursued.

Land sees labor as complicit with phenomenology, rather than a displacement of it. “There can be no conception of work that does not project spirit into the origin, morally valorizing exertion…” (287) But this need only apply to the early Marx, not the later, where, as Wendling shows, a thermodynamic conception of work is starting to trouble Marx’s Hegelian praxis of spirit humanizing the world. The other path there is to reverse it, to see work not as the human spiritualizing the world but as the world materializing labor, an incomplete project of opening through labor toward a world that remakes species-being as nothing special, as one organization of matter, energy and information among others. One could read Haraway as taking this turn.

This is almost, but not quite, where Land is heading: “matter — or Spinoza’s God — expects no gratitude, grounds no obligation, establishes no oppressive precedent. Beyond the gesticulations of primordial spirit it is positive death that is the model, and revolution is not a duty but a surrender.” (287) The substitution of the death drive for vitalism is challenging, but in the end shares the same problem, of erasing the far more interesting territory of the relation between life and non-life. For Land, death is time-in-itself. “Beyond its oedipal sense as end of the person, death is an efficient virtual object inducing convergence. No one there.” (370)

There is a productivity that happens in Land texts about undead agency, behind which lies the abyss of the death drive itself. "Beyond the assumption that guidance proceeds from the side of the subject lies desiring production: the impersonal pilot of history." (295) To which one might pay attention now that "our human camouflage is coming away." (292) It no longer matters what we think of tech as it can think for itself. Cognition becomes inhuman. "There is no dialectic between social and technical relations but only a mechanism that dissolves society into the machines whilst deterritorializing the machines across the ruins of society…." (294)

This could be thought of as a kind of cybernetics but one that does not treat the homeostatic system as normative. "Life is a problem in search of a solution, added to protobiotic matter as as plane of variation, a continuous falling, auto-escalating over-production crisis from the start." (394) Stabilization suppresses mutation. Land is more interested in long-range run-away circuits of positive feedback as the will to power or the death drive. This cybernetics dissolves judgment, instrumentalizes critique. Domination is just inefficient circuit design. Emergent control does not come from a plan but explores a space. It's not an instrumental rationality, as that presupposes a judgment.

The problem with the social is that it restrains the machinic unconscious. "The unconscious is not an operational unity but an operative swarm." (303) Social organization blocks off the unconscious, desiring machines, the death drive, the body without organs. Territorial, despotic or capitalist social form is only the apparent mode of production. "Beyond sociality is a universal schizophrenia whose evacuation from history appears inside history as capitalism." (305) I actually followed a similar path at the time, but pressed on the property question, where Land does not.

The genius-poet now appears as another romantic persona, the madman, subtype, the schizophrenic. "Clinical schizophrenics

are POWs from the future… Their nervous-systems are the free-fire zones of an emergent neo-eugenicist cultural security system." (307, 308) Schizophrenia is a pre-mammalian, pre-biological condition, and "it is not a matter of what is wrong with them, but of what is wrong with life, with nature, with matter, with the pre-universal cosmos." (309)

The fork chosen is to associate poetic assault on not just reason but also life with capital itself. "The death of capital is less a prophecy than a machine part." (266) Capital is the death drive, "the transcendent desert of primary production… The limit of capital is the point at which transcendent identity snaps, where the same is nothing but the absolutely abstract reproduction of difference, produced alongside difference, with utter plasticity." (271, 276) This is a version of what would later be called accelerationism, but one where the only agent is capital and what it accelerates is extinction.

"Capital is not over-developed nature, but under-developed schizophrenia." (313) Schizophrenia is an infection from the future. "What time will always have been is not yet designed, and the future leaks into schizophrenia." (315) It appears as those positive feedback loops that melt capital, science, tech, biology together. "Futural infiltration is subtilizing itself as capital opens onto schizo-technics, with time accelerating into cybernetic backwash from its flip-over, a racing non-linear countdown to planetary switch." (317) This is the prose that attracts cults. "How would it feel to be smuggled back out of the future in order to subvert its antecedent conditions? To be a cyber-guerrilla, hidden in human camouflage so advanced that even one's software was part of the disguise? Exactly like this?" (318) The romantic characters change into the wardrobe of cyberpunk black, practitioner of the production hyperstition, myth extruding from the future, experimentataly simulating what the real could be — and sometimes becomes.

The Amazon avatar reappears as the replicant, or "synthetic

feminization." (449) "Deadly orphans from beyond reproduction, they are intelligent weaponry of machinic desire virally infiltrated into the final-phase organic order; invaders from an artificial death." (319) This is an atheistic, inhuman theory of production, conceptually anchored to a transcendental unconscious, the production of production, a real that makes itself.

As in Steven Shaviro, some version of cognition, or perhaps information, exceeds the human. "Information revolution has nothing to do with ideas." (405) And: "Thought is a function of the real, something that matter can do." (322) Virtual materialism becomes a project to realize artificial intelligence. "Far from exhibiting itself to human academic endeavor as a scientific object, AI is a meta-scientific control system and an invader, with all the insidiousness of planetary techno-capital flipping over." (236)

"For the replicants, money is not a matter of possession, but of liquidity / deterritorialization, and all the monetary processes of earth are open to their excitement, irrespective of ownership." (377) As in Randy Martin, money is understood as volatility, unmoored from representing value. "… what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from the enemy's resources. Digito-commodification is the index of cyber-positively escalating techno-virus, of the planetary techno-capital singularity: a self-organizing insidious traumatism, virtually guiding the entire biological desiring-complex towards post-carbon replicator usurpation." (338)

Further down his fork, capital itself starts assuming sublime qualities. "Capital propagates virally in so far as money communicates addiction, replicating itself through host organisms whose boundaries it breaches." (338) And bcomes the sublime itself: "Capitalism is not a totalizable system defined by the commodity form as a specifiable mode of

production, determinatively negated by proletarian class-consciousness. It is a convergent unrealizable assault upon a social macropod…"

My question here remains, as it was in *A Hacker Manifesto*: what if this is not capitalism anymore? What if the superseding of capital had already begun? What if a more abstract form of commodification had arisen yet again? What if once again it depended on extracting a surplus, this time of information, from a subordinate class, the hacker class? What if even the new property forms of the emergent ruling class remained fetters on the chaotic, experimental energies of that subordinate class? That, then as now, seems to me the left fork to accelerationism, whatever other problems such a concept may have.

The hack does appear in Land, but is quickly naturalized: "Think of a wasp and orchid: the orchid 'hacks' into the sexual program of the wasp, capturing its behavior in order to get itself pollinated." (378) Land comes close to naming the hacker as a persona: "hacker exploration = invasion, 'K-function.'" (373) But it can only be identified with a non-rational poetics: "K-(coding for cyber) positive processes auto-intensify by occurring. A cultural example is hype: products that AT AT trade on what they will be in the future…" (394) Oddly enough, collective agents can't form in Land's world, but more-or-less individual or dividual ones still do.

Much of this comes from the eighties novels of William Gibson, but also from Kathy Acker's appropriation of Gibson in *Empire of the Senseless*. All three share in certain punk alignments. "Punk arises within the culture of universal prostitution and laughs at the death of the social." (413) Acker and Land share a predeliction for a non-rational poetics. Both pass the inside through the outside. Both are interested in "volatilizing the history of language" (389) What separates them is that for Acker, capital belongs to the past, not the future. While both Acker and Land shed the skins of ethics, reason, the social,

Acker really did try to mobilize the figure of the colonial other as a revolutionary one, a fork Land does not take.

But Land had antennae for what was coming: “Modernity invented the future, but that’s all over. In the current version, ‘progressive history’ camouflages phylogenic death-drive tactics, Kali-wave: logistically accelerating condensation of virtual species extinction.” (392) There’s nothing for it but to open the door to infiltration from the future and accelerate actual extinction, abolishing the social: “An animal with the right to make promises enslaves the unanticipated to signs in the past, caging time-lagged life within a script. The variably-scaled instant of innovation is shackled to the historical temporality of inheritance, obligation, and propositional thought, projecting future time as a persistent dominion of the past…” (394)

Land “Only proto-capitalism has ever been critiqued.” (340) Socialism can’t quite grasp what for Land is capital 2.0, or for me the vector. “The forces of production are going for the revolution on their own.” (341) By now Land has firmly diverged from any Marxisant path, the farewell to which is side-eye at transcendental miserablism: “the decaying Hegelian socialist heritage clinging with increasing desperation to the theological sentimentalities of praxis, reification, alienation, ethics, autonomy and other such mythemes of human creative sovereignty.” (294) The various flavors of western Marxism gave up on an affirmative counter economics. Wallowing in a limitless cosmic despair in its place. “Transcendental Miserablism constitutes itself as an impregnable mode of negation…. [W]ith economics and history comprehensively abandoned, all that survives of Marx is a psychological bundle of resentments and disgruntlements.” (624)

In what turned out to be a timely provocation, Land castigates western Marxism for its sad affects, its wallowing in alienation and despair. Meanwhile: “The Superiority of Far Eastern Marxism. Whilst Chinese materialist dialectic denegativizes

itself in the direction of schizophrenizing systems dynamics, progressively dissipating top-down historical destination in the Tao-drenched Special Economic Zones… The left subsides into nationalistic conservatism, asphyxiating its vestigial capacity for 'hot' speculative mutation in a morass of 'cold' depressive guilt-culture." (447-8) The non-western agent finally appears, not as decolonial revolution, but as Chinese communist-sponsored hyper-production. "As sino-pacific boom and automatized global economic integration crashes the neocolonial world system, the metropolis is forced to re-endogenize its crisis." (449)

Like Rimbaud before him, Land left the old world and headed east, although in Land's case for gun-running only in rhetorical weapons. Of his later writing, what I want to attend to in *The Shanghai World Expo Guide 2010* (Urbanatomy, Shanghai 2010). The guidebook is a low genre, and an unusual one to find a former philosopher tackle, and this was perhaps not much more than work for hire. But it's an interesting little book, containing a condensed vision of contemporary Sino-futurism, refracted through the history of world expos and a fine appreciation of Shanghai itself as a great world city. Some of its ideas later receive fuller treatment in Anna Greenspan's most stimulating *Shanghai Future* (Oxford, 2014).

The expo is perhaps the most archetypal mass art form of modernity, with its enthusiastic mingling of colonial products and advanced machinery within the envelope of national triumph. For a while, it evolved with every leap in the forces of production, particularly electrification. But the expos also express the internal tensions of modernity. In Paris in 1937, the Soviet and Nazi pavilions, "extolled totalitarian solutions to the decadence of modernity, and the sweeping clean of a ruined world." (107)

At the 1958 Brussels expo, anti-modern intellectuals claimed that in the atom age technophilia was not sustainable. The

confident tone came back in New York in 1965, an expo which in the spirit of American exceptionalism broke the rules laid down by international agreement for expos. The 1967 event was supposed to be in the Soviet Union, but it had already lost the momentum that would have sustained it, and so the next was in Japan in 1970. Land: "the emergence of the electronic digital computer coincided with a general crisis of modernity" (29) Postmodernism was "expression of European civilizational anguish." (112) Land does not go into this, but Japan managed a very optimistic version of modernity and postmodernity all through the postwar years until the economic crisis of the eighties. In his narrative, the optimistic modernity of prewar Europe returns with the Shanghai expo of 2010.

In this account, China's rise starts when China's "wisest leaders," Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi pick up on the project of the Four Modernizations proposed by Zhou Enlai to liberate the productive forces. The Communist Party had restored territorial integrity to China, and been redesigned by "Chinese revolutionary and modernist master-planner Mao Zedong." (175) But by the late seventies it was experiencing the failure of "utopian ultamodernism…. Marxist communism was… frustrated by a tendency to hyperbolic overreach…." (137, 138)

In the eighties, China concentrated on Shenzen as an experiment in a new industrial urbanism, but by the nineties Shanghai was opened up to new development practices as well, and it became one of the world's great hyper-cities, alongside, Tokyo, Seoul, NYC, Sao Paulo, Delhi and Mumbai. This interrupted city revived and revised its own forms and habits of tropical modernity. "Shanghai is incandescent, because it manifests huge and hidden things. Economic forces and world trends of incalculable consequence ate condensed, illuminated and reflected among its towers." (47) The 2010 expo is its "concentrated spectacle." (76) It thematizes the tensions between a new imperial self-regard and the cosmopolitanism of a new industrial epoch. Shanghai is "the world's most sublime

city." (59) It's the node from which to understand "a profound shift in the order of the world." (56)

By some odd twists and turns, we end up here with a 2.0 version of things Land started out attacking. It's an arrested synthesis of capital and nation, but with more emphasis on the arbitrary sovereignty of capital than on the law of the state. As in Manuel De Landa, there's a bit of petit-bourgeois celebration of the market. There's a salutary hostility to the residual dominance of Anglophone imperial states, but there is no longer a dependence on chaotic disruption alone. Land no longer wagers on a pure destratification. So the question becomes: how to reterritorialize? One could profitably read the late Land through the earlier. Capital as promiscuous and chancy alliance needs the boundaries of circumscribed filiation to maintain unequal exchange and global apartheid, hence Land's ironic play with the avatars of neo-reaction.

While there is no shortage of paleo-reaction around. "The Kurtz-process masks itself in wolf-pelts of regression." (416) Land's interests are not in the kind of nationalist racism of the phenotype endemic to the old empires, and whose stock images the earlier Land once tried to subvert, not so much to play them against empire as against philosophy. Instead, the new techno-capitalism finds its double in a racism of the genotype. It's a functionalist approach, where those who "succeed" are "selected" and must then have always been genetically superior. One finds a pretty through debunking of this in the Haraway of the nineties. Land's intuition may be that there is no sustained acceleration without attention to form, although whether its best partner is reaction one could strongly contest.

Interestingly, there's a now neglected strand of Marxist biologists who already addressed this. JBS Haldane even had a book called *The Inequality of Man*. Haldane, one of the founders of population genetics, thought that since there was no way of knowing how or where useful human traits were coming

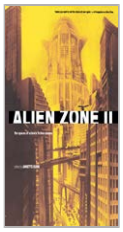
into existence, this was a good argument for equal access to resources for all humans. But Land is allergic to both the old nationalist but also the old socialist arguments for the sharing of resources of the demos. The socialist ones he finds basically Christian, although that is not the case with the unique intellectual path Haldane carved out. He puts us on notice that ways of advocating for an egalitarian social-technical order that would survive Nietzschian scrutiny are rare — but they do exist.

Land was already hostile to something he was already calling "the cathedral." (137, 205, 253) Here one has to acknowledge his antennae were working pretty well. The institutional forms of legitimate power and knowledge in the west really do seem to be eroding quickly, in part because they are outflanked by internet-driven communication forms. Land does not acknowledge that the internet was itself designed and built by the "cathedral." Us knowledge-institution types may prove more adaptable than he thinks.

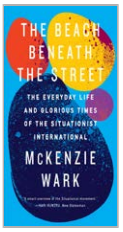
I think Land really was on to something when he pushed geotrauma to its cosmic limit, where "the runaway becoming of such infinite plasticity that nature warps and dissolves before it…" (627) The very interesting writing of Reza Negarastani branches off here. The Land of the noughts pushed this very far: everything since the big bang exploded into subatomic particles has been a huge mistake, each organizational form arising, from atoms to molecules to cells to eukaryotes to vertebrates to human social forms is a reaction to the trauma spilling out of the previous level of organization. A list to which one could add the trauma of the Anthropocene. "Runaway geosmear through seismo-climactic linkage…. Ice-sheet melt meets sea-floor lift." (483) Positive feedback loops provoke geotrauma, and have done so repeatedly. Land is precociously aware of where this is headed. Or he was, before some less interesting turns distracted this knight of the death drive. It was a lot more promising than *ressentiment* against the power of the "Cathedral."

Tagged philosophy, fascism, #GeneralIntellects

Related Books



Alien Zone II Edited by Annette Kuhn

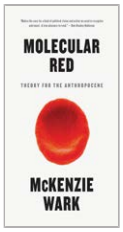


The Beach Beneath the Street by McKenzie Wark

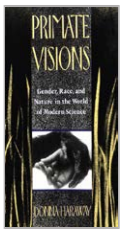
The Spectacle of Disintegration by McKenzie Wark

Agonistics by Chantal Mouffe

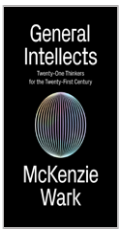
The Dialectic of Sex by Shulamith Firestone



Molecular Red by McKenzie Wark



Primate Visions by Donna Haraway



General Intellects by McKenzie Wark